



TITLE:

<Book Reviews>Yow Cheun Hoe 游俊豪. Yimin guiji he lisan lunshu: Xinma huaren zuqun de zhongceng mailuo 移民轨迹和离散论述--新马华人族群的重层脉络 [Migration trajectories and diasporic discourses: Multiples contexts of ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia]. Shangh ...

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CITATION:

Lee, Tony C.. <Book Reviews>Yow Cheun Hoe 游俊豪. Yimin guiji he lisan lunshu: Xinma huaren zuqun de zhongceng mailuo 移民轨迹和离散论述--新马华人族群的重层脉络 [Migration trajectories and diasporic discourses: Multiples contexts of ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Mal ...

ISSUE DATE:

2016-04

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/210513>

RIGHT:

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Yimin gui ji he lisan lunshu: Xinma huaren zuqun de zhongceng mailuo
移民轨迹和离散论述——新马华人族群的重层脉络 [Migration trajectories and
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Malaysia]

YOW CHEUN HOE 游俊豪

Shanghai: Sanlian Publishing Company, 2014, ii+243p.

The Chinese word “Huaren” has been used to refer broadly to Chinese people outside of China, but there is little consensus on the details of the term’s definition. FitzGerald (1965) employed the term “the third China,” whereas Alexander (1973) called them “the invisible China”; Heidhues (1974) perceived them to be “minorities,” but Purcell (1980) continued to write of them as “the Chinese.” Recently, scholars in the field seem to prefer the phrase “ethnic Chinese” in order to better reflect the “outside-in” nature¹⁾ of these Southeast Asians with their origins in China.²⁾ The scientific community’s lack of consensus over the definition of the “ethnic Chinese” confirms one belief—namely, that the identity of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia entails a complex composition. To trace the origin and the impact of such an identity requires multilevel analysis, and that is what the author of this book intends to achieve.

Focusing on the cases of Malaysia and Singapore, Yow Cheun Hoe (游俊豪) discusses the anxiety of the ethnic Chinese in their search for identity: on one hand, the original inhabitants in the two countries push the ethnic Chinese to the margins of the out-group; on the other hand, the ethnic Chinese deny considering themselves as China Chinese. At first glance, this thesis is by

1) The so-called “outside-in” effect refers to the identification of ethnic Chinese Southeast-Asians as outsiders.

2) For further discussion of the terms used to refer to ethnic Chinese, see Suryadinata (1997); Wang (1992, 1–10).

no means novel; nevertheless, the author justifies the book's existence by proposing a new approach to interpret the situation of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore. He compares ethnic Chinese migration trajectories with their diasporic discourses with the aim of elucidating the ethnic Chinese "inner self" and their impact on the society in which they live.

This book is divided into three parts. Part One revisits ethnic Chinese diasporic experiences at a national level. The author scrutinizes the migration trajectories of ethnic Chinese from three perspectives—family, race, and nation. The analysis reveals that ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore manifest different patterns of diasporic experience. Decades after their immigration, the Chinese in Malaysia experience difficulty as members of a social minority; even after establishing themselves in their host country (Chapter Two), these wanderers still seek an identity. By contrast, even though the Chinese in Singapore encounter structural problems when integrating into Singaporean society, their existence obliges the government to implement economic or even legal reforms in order to achieve a harmonious society (Chapter Three). To illustrate these experiences, the author opts for an unusual approach: Chapter Four evokes the migration trajectories of two representative figures in Singapore—Tan Kah Kee (1874–1967) and Lee Kong Chiang (1893–1967)—whereas Chapter Five probes the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of cultural signals transmitted by Nanyang University (1955–80) as a way of reflecting the transformation of ethnic Chinese people in an evolving society.

Part Two of the book discusses ethnic Chinese connections with China. This is illustrated by the behavior of emigrant communities (*qiaoxian*) vis-à-vis Fanyu and Xinyi—two townships in the province of Guangdong from which many ethnic Chinese emigrants originated. Fanyu and Xinyi are evoked and compared because they tell different stories with respect to ethnic Chinese contribution and solidarity with their home-towns. In this regard, Fanyu benefits far more from emotional and material returns by its emigrants than Xinyi does. Opposed to traditional views, the author argues that ethnic Chinese attachment to China is not simply driven by kinship; rather, it is a blend of nostalgia, the structures and processes of the host nation, and economic development (p. 71). This is to say that the study of ethnic Chinese attachment to the home country should take both emotional and material incentives into account. Eventually, the rise and fall of emigrant communities may be subject to the pressure of those incentives. These dynamics might in turn reshape the behavior of ethnic Chinese in their (new) home country.

Part Three advances the discussion of ethnic Chinese beyond any physical boundaries by reviewing diasporic discourses in Chinese writings in Malaysia and Singapore. The author is convinced that these Chinese writings are worth probing because diasporic writers' narratives highlight the collective memory of the ethnic Chinese. It is memory which sketches how ethnic Chinese have responded to alien social structures and to their positions within them; it is memory which cries out for empathy, anxiety, resistance, and repression (p. 153). Generally, Malaysian Chinese literatures touch on four issues—the question of Chineseness, the polysystem theory,

the Malaysian-Singaporean relationship, and sinophone literature. The book shows that these works go beyond literary description and reach into the fields of history, sociology, and cultural studies.

Nevertheless, some aspects of this book can be confusing. For instance, if Chapters Three and Four help us to comprehend the situation of ethnic Chinese people from both human and institutional perspectives, the author seems to focus exclusively on the case of Singapore and to leave the case of Malaysia behind. Moreover, it is arguable whether the experiences of Tan Kah Kee and Lee Kong Chiang, notwithstanding their historical importance, can best reflect the “new” immigrants from China in the post-colonial period. The book, although brief, addresses the situation of ethnic Chinese in two countries. Readers might sometimes be uncertain as to which country is being discussed as they turn from one chapter to the next. I suspect that readers would appreciate the book more if the chapter arrangement had been more lucid. Regardless of that, the book offers new perspectives in the study of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore. The author does not merely follow the old discourses in a well-studied subject; instead, he updates relevant information, raises new questions, proposes new explanations, and even presents new knowledge about a neglected topic, notably when it comes to emigrant communities and to Chinese writings in Malaysia and Singapore. I suggest that this book might well complement the classics of ethnic Chinese written by reputed predecessors such as Wang Gungwu (1992).

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